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Serving Queens: Where Are We Now

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SERVING QUEENS: WHERE WE ARE NOW

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It has been fourteen years since an MTA construction program called for new subway routes to Queens. A recent study whittled fourteen alternative solutions to three. The outcome depends as much on the planners' work as on the MTA Board's willingness to make a choice.

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by
ROSS SANDLER and STEVEN M. JUROW

In 1968 the Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA) adopted a construction program calling for new subway routes in Manhattan, Brooklyn, Queens, and the Bronx. Although partially begun, the program fell apart piecemeal as the 1970s moved along, bringing municipal fiscal crises and the stunning deterioration of subway services. As a result, the focus of capital program objectives went from the construction of new to the rehabilitation of old routes.

With the beginning of the MTA's five-year capital program in 1982—and the prospects for improved subway service,—the MTA began a two-year consideration of new route options. This time the MTA, with narrowed choices, will select among various methods to serve Queens better. There are three critical reasons why this choice must be made:

- The "E" and "F" Queens Boulevard lines remain the most crowded on the system; relief is urgently needed.
- Large areas of Queens have no subway service at all and would benefit

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greatly from improved rail connections to Manhattan's central business districts.

- By 1984 more than \$1.12 billion of public funds will have been invested to solve both problems, but without any real benefit because the 63rd Street tunnel in Long Island City, at one end of Queens, and the Archer Avenue subway in Jamaica, at the other end, are not yet connected with the subway system in a useful way.

Transportation planners within the MTA, city, state, and other agencies recognized this situation and began to sift through fiscally realistic options that could make the widely separated new subway lines useful. This has not been an easy process; scaling down past dreams to present realities never is. Except for an occasional briefing session and news article on the lack of usefulness of the new tunnels, that process continued in the planners' offices, away from public debate.

Two quite useful perceptions emerged from the planners' work. First the planners "found" a new route to use as an alternative to constructing the planned Queens Bypass—which was to be a high-cost, high-speed subway express track along the Long Island Rail Road's main line, linking the two new subway tunnels. This came about in 1980, when the MTA Board decided to stop construction on the 63rd Street subway at 29th Street in Long Island City. The configuration this decision imposed on the system allowed consideration of new alternatives along the LIRR's Montauk Branch. The Montauk Branch, an underutilized LIRR rail right-of-way, lies one mile south of the LIRR main line, starting about 1,000 feet from the 63rd Street Tunnel's current end point. The line crosses through Queens to the LIRR Jamaica station where it connects to the rest of the LIRR's lines and offers a possible connection to the new Archer Avenue subway. At present the LIRR makes limited use of the Montauk Branch; some freight and two diesel passenger trains use it daily.

The name "Montauk" conjures a vision of the LIRR's heavily used rail lines carrying Suffolk and Nassau residents to and from their Manhattan offices. East of Jamaica this image holds true. West of the Jamaica station, however, the more appropriate name for the line would be the Forgotten Queens Freight Line. But this freight line does have one supreme advantage—with relatively modest capital investment it could tie the new 63rd Street Tunnel to the Archer Avenue tunnel and make both far more useful. There are other ways to make the linkage, including the original 1968 plan for the Queens Bypass, but the Montauk branch opens new low-cost possibilities.

The second perception was that subways could be operated on railroad right-of-way, perhaps allowing the 63rd Street tunnel to be used more, at far lower costs. Mixing subway or commuter trains on the same track, however, raises formidable institutional barriers. These barriers involve mostly labor policies and wages, the management of mixed subway and commuter rail services, and federal and state administrative prerogatives. The upshot is that, even within the MTA family, transportation choices may be dictated by institutional concerns.

Many planners believe that these institutional problems can be resolved. Even if not promptly solved, however, it would be possible to have passengers transfer

between railroad and subway trains in Long Island City, thereby permitting the LIRR and the TA to maintain—at least for the immediate future—their traditional jurisdictional separation.

These perceptions were developed slowly in the context of a three-year formal study conducted jointly by the city and the MTA. The study report, issued in January 1982, whittled down fourteen possible routes for Queens to just three options. In agreeing to these three options, a diverse, twelve-agency steering committee operated without high level directives as to the preferred result; they were left alone to sort out the issues within the steering committee. The planners' are now at the point where a study, scheduled for completion in March 1984, will allow the MTA to choose among three final alternatives.

Northern Boulevard Connection

This scheme is the choice to go *north* from the 63rd Street tunnel. It calls for the construction of a quarter-mile tunnel connection in Long Island City to link the 63rd Street tunnel with the local tracks of the Queens Boulevard IND. With a price tag of \$73 million it is the cheapest and easiest solution to implement. It would allow expanded local subway train service between central Queens and Midtown Manhattan. That this option would ease crowding on IND "E" and "F" expresses is predicated on the projection that a 50 percent increase in local service on Queens Boulevard would induce riders to use locals rather than the faster but far more crowded expresses serving the route. This scheme provides no additional express service to Jamaica, no extension of service to new areas of Queens, and no benefits for Long Island commuters.

Montauk Transfer

This scheme would extend the 63rd Street subway *south* a short distance to the nearby LIRR Sunnyside freight yards and construct a new transfer station. At this station, passengers would switch to expanded commuter rail service on the LIRR Montauk Branch. Upgrading and electrifying the line would permit low-fare commuter trains to operate on existing track between the new transfer station and outlying stations in central and southeast Queens that are not served by subway at present. It would also improve service to residential areas along the Montauk Branch. Moreover, because diesel equipment can still operate over electrified tracks, electrification will allow the LIRR the flexibility to operate either diesel or electric commuter trains.

Montauk Transfer service would be attractive to many outer Queens riders who must presently ride a bus to Jamaica and transfer to crowded "E" and "F" subway trains. Because much of the crowding on the Queens IND is caused by initial heavy loading from buses at the stations along Hillside Avenue in Jamaica, the Montauk line would relieve the Queens line by siphoning off many of those travellers who now have no rail alternative. This scheme would also spread LIRR passenger loads better and relieve congested main-line service by giving LIRR travellers who now

change for the subway at Penn Station a transfer option in Long Island City.

The Montauk Transfer plan would be relatively straightforward to implement and would require a moderate capital investment of \$206 million. The key advantages of this plan are that it benefits both inner and outer Queens and Long Island travelers at a single stroke and may be implemented and expanded in stages faster than some of the options that raise institutional issues. Implementing the Montauk Transfer does not preclude converting the line to thru-subway service at a later date, should that prove desirable.

A variation of this scheme is to run service with diesel powered trains initially. Though this would save \$30 million in electrification costs on the Montauk Branch, diesels have somewhat lower performance standards. Moreover, without electrification, service options for the LIRR, whose commuter trains operations are 80 percent electrified, would be limited.

Montauk-Archer

This plan also extends the 63rd Street subway *south* to the Sunnyside yards, but envisions using the Montauk Branch for *subway* operation. This is similar to the previous alternative, but, in this plan, trains from the 63rd Street tunnel would run directly on electrified Montauk Branch tracks with no transfer. New stations would be added along the route. In Richmond Hill these tracks would be connected to the Jamaica Avenue elevated and then to the new Archer Avenue subway, allowing direct subway service from Manhattan along the Montauk route into downtown Jamaica. This scheme would provide essentially the same service features at less than half the cost of the original Bypass proposal. At \$218 million, the Montauk-Archer plan would provide excellent service to downtown Jamaica and to residential areas along the Montauk Branch in central Queens which do not have good transit service now.

Both operational and institutional problems are posed by running freight and subway trains on the same tracks, and these problems must be solved for the scheme to work. One possible solution would be operate the Montauk Branch on a time-sharing basis with subway trains operating during peak hours and possibly through the middle of the days, with freight operations at night. The one major disadvantage of the Montauk-Archer scheme is that it offers no immediate new rail service to outer Queens or to Long Island.

Debate and Decisions

The new MTA study to weigh the environmental and operational impact of these options will cost \$1 million and take eighteen months. On top of the two-year city study this effort frustrates both the participants and the public. But the primary cause for delay has been a fiscal roller coaster followed by a subway service disaster that caused capital assets to disappear or be diverted. As Richard Ravitch, MTA chairman, wrote in 1981, the primary thrust of the MTA's initial five-year capital program *has* to be rehabilitation of the existing system, not new routes. But, even

with that priority, the possibility of improving Queens subway service has re-emerged with the slow advances in the planning process.

Where potential investment of such size is the issue, planners properly insist upon a full analysis. Neither the MTA, nor the state or city agencies have yet adopted a final position on the three Queens transit options. It is not now possible, nor was it possible before, to force a quicker selection given the history, diversity of opinion, and admitted complexity of the choices. For the public, however, it is decidedly unsatisfying to list problems to be studied with neither an answer given nor priorities applied.

The Regional Plan Association (RPA), a private planning organization in the New York metropolitan area which is not a participant in the official study, has analyzed the initial study and supported a single option (See page 70 of this issue). But RPA's choice is far from the last word, and other planners question RPA's analysis and conclusion. Some fault RPA for downgrading the transfer options when a transfer scheme eliminates most institutional problems and provides a direct railroad-to-subway transfer on the fringe of Manhattan rather than at Jamaica. Others criticize RPA for having criteria that are too rigid and an analysis of cost effectiveness that is too limited. They point out that two of the three options retained for further study in RPA's analysis are categorized as having no significant benefit in relieving Queens IND congestion. This reflects a difference of opinion on the best configuration of the new service and assumptions as to who will ride it and where they will come from.

At the level of political debate, top officials have shifted from devoting substantial resources for new routes to a near standstill for all but the most essential rehabilitation of the existing system. At the planning staff level within government agencies, the political and fiscal decisions were understood, but their transportation implications could not be so readily accepted. People still must travel to work every day; Manhattan traffic congestion has reached all time highs; and the abruptly halted 63rd Street tunnel cannot offer any relief until more is done. As a result the transportation planners have continued and advanced the debate over low-cost alternatives within the agencies.

Now a period of renewed political public debate approaches. This is because the MTA Board has moved far towards starting system rehabilitation and because the completion of the 63rd Street and Archer Avenue tunnels will trigger public questions over an expenditure of so much public money with so little transit payoff. The outcome of that debate depends as much upon the planners' work as it does on the willingness of the MTA Board to choose among the low-cost alternatives.